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A L E C T U R E

ON

The Literary Opportunities

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MEN OF BUSINESS,

DELIVERED BEFORE

*The Athenian Institute and Mercantile Library of
Philadelphia, April 3, 1838.*

BY HENRY REED,

Professor of English Literature in the University of Penna.

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LECTURE.

The time allowed for the delivery of a public lecture is brief for the convenient discussion of any subject requiring some range of argument and illustration. It is the dictate therefore of prudence, to refrain from all protestations of inexperience, for the simple reason that I am not here to speak about myself.

The subject to which I hasten is, "*The literary opportunities of men of business.*" If I can persuade that there is opportunity enough for habits of reading—if I can plant in any heart that spirit, which may give life to seasons of listlessness, or snatch some hours from unworthy pursuits, my purpose will be attained. The vagueness of the term "men of business," demands some enquiry how it may be desirable at present to appropriate it. In one sense, all are men of business—most of us are at work to earn our daily bread—some are nursing property already acquired, and striving for more—a few, wealthy by industry or chance, are at work to preserve their possessions. And thus we are all busy—those in poverty, those in competence, and those in affluence. We are all working-men, and the attempts to create distinctions in that respect are as vain as they are invidious. The use of the term "men of business," brings me into the neighbourhood of that error of appropriating to one portion of society a designation which of right belongs to every industrious member. It implied the falsehood that those alone on whom it was conferred were "working-men," and thus there was cast on all others the reproach of idleness. It recognised no form of labour but hard-handed work, as if the curse on

Adam were not upon us all. The name may have served a party purpose, but it has not truth enough to carry it into the vocabulary of honest, thoughtful men.

In the various pursuits of industry there is, however, this distinction, that some lead to an intercourse with books, while others lead away from it. Now in this there is not on either side any offensive superiority. If any individual chance to enjoy greater facilities for reading than have fallen to the lot of others, it suggests no foolish pride, but rather the question what better service he can render than to remove the obstacles in their way. What more friendly turn, nay, what plainer duty is there, when his heart is filled with grateful recollections of the happiness which books have given, than to open to others the same sources of enjoyment?

It may then readily be conceived, that it is proposed to apply the term "men of business" to those whose engagements in active life are not connected with habits of reading. It is right to state, that the subject was prompted to my mind, by observing the efforts of the Mercantile Library to elevate the commercial character. But while I may have that portion of society in view, there is no intention of limiting the subject, believing as I do, that the members of every department of business, mechanical, commercial, or what are styled the learned professions, have an interest in the discussion of neglected literary opportunities. When I consider, too, the duties of another part of the community represented in this hall, I am anxious to make the subject available to those whose domestic cares may aptly be blended with a communion with books. I regret the want of some term of more convenient significancy than that of "men of business." The subject is not peculiar to one class. There is a vast field of thought open to us all; and the merchant, whose thoughts travel only on the highway of traffic—the lawyer, whose reading is not enlarged beyond those books, whose very dress sets them aside from the company of *real* books—or the physician, whose mind dwells wholly on patients in

reality or in expectancy, is cramping himself within closer limits than are healthy to his individual powers, or worthy of his vocation. Nor is the subject peculiar to one sex. While, therefore, a term has been employed intended to avoid the ambiguity of a more general expression, let it not be supposed that any exclusive sense is contemplated. I shall rely upon the intelligence of this audience to make the special applications which the economy of time will forbid me pausing to point out.

There are many persons, I am well aware, already familiarly acquainted with the literary opportunities which are open to them, and who have, therefore, no other personal interest in this lecture than a sympathy with its design. But there can be no doubt that there is a larger number whose use of books is not habitual—whose reading is only occasional, suggested by accident, caprice, or fashion—confined to the lightest forms of literature, and resorted to only in the last extremity, when other plans of amusement fail. If this were the effect of weakness of intellect or frivolity, it would be idle to argue against it. But such is not the fact, for every one may observe, even in the circle of his own acquaintance, men and women of sound and often vigorous minds, in this unreading, bookless predicament, or else with tastes bounded within some narrow province of letters. Now, why is it, that what is intended for all, finds an avenue to the minds of only portions of society? Let it be remembered, that what is usually entitled "Literature," is addressed to all; it is not technical—it is not professional. Disdaining peculiar phraseologies—the dialects of science and art—it clothes itself in the common language of social life. It recognises no sect—no calling—but comes to us all in the familiar accents of our mother tongue. Why is it, then, that so many are lingering on the frontiers of this public domain? There are various causes—some at work imperceptibly. It is my design to show that all which I am able to detect, are exaggerated beyond their real importance.

I have no hesitation in asserting that any person—

man or woman—with an average amount of intellect, and with learning enough to read a newspaper, has the whole region of literature lying open. The highest forms of poetry, a large portion of theology, history, biography, the drama, fiction, criticism, and every form of literature, are the common property of us all; and that individual who does not realise this, has faculties in him that he knows not of, and which will become decrepid from disuse. Yet the influence of these causes is natural, and I shall be grievously misunderstood, if any expression falling from my lips should have the appearance of casting the least reproach on those whose minds have been thus influenced. I trust that the subject may be so treated as to involve no thought of such arrogance. Accident, early taste, the nature of a profession, may make some men habitually readers of books, but it would argue monstrous folly to make that a pretext for superiority over others whose habits had taken a different bent.

The foremost obstacle to the cultivation of habits of reading, is probably the want of time. The man of business may allege, that when he rises in the morning, he hastens to his work; that he knows no intermission except for his meals; that night comes on, and the season of sleep, not too early for the repose both of body and mind, alike exhausted by the labours of the day, and the succeeding day brings with it the same round of toil. From another quarter, the consumption of time in domestic and social duties may be hinted at. Now, if any man's time be so engrossed that, from Monday morning to Saturday night he can claim no respite, the case is indeed desperate, to be addressed only with pity for the cruelty of a calling claiming so much beyond not only the reasonable requisitions of industry, but the capacity of physical and mental endurance. If any woman plead that her household cares leave no unappropriated hours, the plea might suggest some misgivings that she must be the mistress of a turbulent garrison, or else that she is relapsing into idolatry of the household

gods, to whom, though not actually enshrined, greater sacrifices may be made than were ever claimed for them in the heyday of paganism. But is it true that “the stuff life is made of” is so rare a commodity? Is the calling of any one so tyrannical, that he can rescue no fragments of time—that there are no moments he can call his own? It cannot be, because uninterrupted labour could be endured by none. The amount of reserved time varies of course with the nature of different occupations. The business of many is prescribed within certain fixed hours, as is the case with a very meritorious class in every commercial community. That of others extends over the whole day. Again, some seasons are attended with great press of business, while others are left to comparative inactivity. Speaking generally, it may be assumed that the labour of most men of business is properly labour of the day, not intended usually to encroach upon the hours of the evening. Let any one make the simple experiment of accurately observing how his time is disposed of, and, after liberal allowance both for business and health, there will be found a surplus of spare time, which may be rescued by the determination not to allow it to be frittered away.

But the leisure hours of the man of business—the remnant after the day’s toil—are perhaps considered too uncertain, and too inadequate. A cultivated habit of reading is regarded as a sort of privilege. “Men of letters,” as they are called, confounded too, it may be, with authors, are looked on as a peculiar class, and thus the erroneous notion is strengthened that it is in vain to attempt the formation of the habit, unless a large amount of time can be devoted to it. Now, is it not an answer to this objection for us to recollect, that in the best days of English literature, there was no distinct class of authors, or of men of letters. Nay, to this very day, no precise meaning can be attached to any title intended to describe such a class as men of letters? Observe, too, that our language furnishes no single word for the thought, and when the attempt is made to express it, it

is by means of an awkward phrase, or by the borrowing of foreign terms. It is a want that we need not seek to supply; for speaking of a man of letters in the same way that we speak of a merchant, or a physician, or a lawyer, suggests a distinctive designation for a class that has no distinct existence, and countenances the error that literary opportunities are not compatible with the demands of active life. Let the effort be made, and it will be found that there is ample time for even extended courses of reading, and that there is no better mode of renovating the spirit, worn and wasted by its daily toil. In truth, the usual difficulty is to provide for the periods of leisure. Is there any one, who, if a volume of deep interest were at hand, could not find time for its perusal, and who would not do so with gladness?

Now, this brings us to the real obstacle, which is to be traced to a more remote cause,—the absence or weakness of a taste for reading. It would be uncandid to palliate this difficulty, the existence of which cannot be doubted, though I believe it to be exaggerated. It is indeed true, that a literary habit cannot be formed at will; it cannot be gained by the hasty impulse of an unreflecting fancy, to be as soon abandoned for some new caprice. The love of reading, like every other valuable principle, demands effort for its formation. Without it, leisure and access to libraries are of no avail; a man may famish for the want of appetite. I will not suppose, that with any present, month passes after month, or week after week, without the opening of a book. If, however, the selection is limited to books of a frivolous character—the inferior and multitudinous works of fiction—it is contributing to a result directly opposed to a healthy taste, because such works have no tendency to stimulate a spirit of enquiry, but rather to decoy the mind away from much truer enjoyment. Rising to a higher order of books—though still of a popular character—it will be found that the reading of one book naturally leads to the reading of another; a passing remark on another author—a striking quotation—some casual hint awakens

curiosity, and you may thus be prompted successively from one literary production to another. Without professing to treat so extensive a subject as the formation of literary taste, but merely to show how it may be aided, this practical hint is given of tracking the suggestions which occur on the pages of most authors of merit. To illustrate this by some work familiar by recent publication, conceive Mr. Lockhart's Life of Sir Walter Scott, distinguished as it is not less for deep personal, than extensive literary, interest, placed in the hands of an individual intelligent, but of unformed reading habits. I can imagine nothing but lamentable torpidity preventing such a one from seeking acquaintance not only with the voluminous effusions of that extraordinary genius, but with the works of the various authors whose names are associated with him. To refer to another instance of the same kind, let any reader acquire a sympathy with the mind of that singular and attractive writer, the late Charles Lamb, and that sympathy alone may lead him into the neglected region of the best literature the English language has ever produced.

The feebleness of literary taste may be ascribed, by some who are conscious of it, to the defects of early education; and it may be thought as impossible to retrieve those opportunities, as to beckon back the days of childhood. This difficulty is also no imaginary one, but while it shows the importance of fostering in early life a taste for reading, it ought not to extinguish the hope of a later day. It would ill become me to breathe one word that could be perverted to the disparagement of systematic instruction; but the most zealous advocate is not bound to be so blind a partisan as to maintain that the sphere of education is of no greater compass than mere tuition. Deeply impressed with the importance of the customary methods of fashioning the mind, yet I do not hesitate to avow the belief, that they are not absolutely indispensable. A brief argument will, I trust, sustain me in saying so, and thus removing one of the obstacles to literary cultivation. What is the purpose

of education in its largest sense ? The noblest definition of it, ever conceived by the mind of man, may be found in one of those splendid prose treatises of Milton, which ought never to have been dazzled into obscurity by the effulgence of his poems. "The end of learning," he tells us, "is to repair the ruins of our first parents."* The definition is higher than those of the common currency, because it bears the impress of the mind by which it was coined ; but it is not the less true. Yes, the purpose of education is to elevate the intellect, and to purify the heart of man, by all the means which are bountifully vouchsafed, and thus to bring him nearer and nearer to the state in which he came newly created from the hand of God. Now, taking this comprehensive view, can any one assume to say that the means of restoration are exclusive privileges of those who chance, in early life, to come under the tutelage of teachers ? Does it accord with the economy of the world, that the mercies of Providence should be thus contracted within the span of human bounty, and that the energies of any mind should be doomed to perish, only because the aid of man is not extended ? In this, as in many other respects, our being is of a mingled nature—we are often dependent on each other, perhaps for the purpose of humbling individual pride, and cherishing the sympathies which bind us together ; but it is another feature of the same system that we are often self-dependent, perhaps for the purpose of saving us from helplessness and despair. The resource of self-education is withheld from no one—the pursuit of knowledge under difficulties may indeed demand high personal fortitude, but it is never too late to redeem the losses of early life. The records of biography show hundreds of such cases, which I cannot pause to allude to.† Let it be remembered, too, that the mighty achieve-

* Milton's "Tractate on Education."

† An excellent summary may be found in the volumes of the "Library of Entertaining Knowledge," entitled "The Pursuit of Knowledge under Difficulties," ascribed to the pen of Lord Brougham.

ments of the mind spring directly from its unaided efforts. Nay, more, all that elementary education professes to accomplish, is to strengthen the capacity of self-culture. In a great measure, a man must learn for himself, or all the wisdom in the world cannot teach him. Why, then, should any one content himself with repining at his disadvantages, and make no effort to retrieve them ? Others may have started earlier, and with fewer incumbrances, but they have not, like a hostile army, either broken down the bridges, or laid waste the country, in their march.

Another difficulty is presented, in an opinion that the cultivation of literary taste is calculated to produce disgust with the drudgery of business—that literary habits conflict with habits of active usefulness. This prejudice may be traced to very different sources. In the first place, men, illiterate and unrefined, are successful in the world, and build up for themselves large fortunes. Then in some cases, when literature is spoken of, they will reply, that *they* never felt the need of it—that there is no better or more productive reading than the “Tables of Interest,” and that for every man of letters you make, you spoil a man of business. Now, what does all this prove ? It may, indeed, disprove what has not been asserted, that literature is essential to the acquisition of wealth. But is it not obvious that it does not, in the smallest degree, prove that literature presents obstacles to worldly welfare. It may prove that ignorance, and vulgarity, and riches, sometimes consort together. It does prove the existence of that human frailty, illustrated long ago by Esop, which leads one creature to set himself up for the standard, and to persuade his fellows that the properties which he does not possess, are useless and injurious excrescences. All that is incumbent on me to establish is, that between a well-regulated habit of reading, and the most active habits of business, there is no incompatibility. The fondness for reading may be abused, and so may every feeling and appetite ; men may eat too much ; they may drink too much ; they

may sleep too much ; they might even breathe too much of the blessed atmosphere that sustains our life ; and, in like manner, they may read too much. Whenever one principle of our nature is indulged at the expense of another, an unhealthy and unnatural condition, whether of mind or body, is the result ; and it is a lamentable error, insinuating itself deeply into the opinions and practice of men, that when an individual enlarges his mind beyond the immediate requisitions of his daily work, he unfits himself for the faithful discharge of that work. Thus it is that men dwarf themselves into *mere* lawyers, *mere* physicians, and *mere* merchants, and women dwindle into *mere* workers of needle-work, as if the whole object of our being were involved in the accomplishment of such tasks. Let me not be understood as stimulating any man to withdraw a single moment from his proper calling, still less as seeking to excite in the mind of any woman a distaste for the noiseless but precious duties of her sex. It is far, too, from my intention to declaim against the love of money, as contrasted with the love of learning. The love of money is a passion, liable, indeed, to fearful abuses, but still a rational and laudable passion ; and there is no more spurious virtue than what is often commended as a generous contempt of money. It is most equivocal praise, which we hear sometimes given to men who are said not to know the value of money—an ignorance which refers quite as often to the property of others as to their own, like one of the grotesque forms of modern “patriotism,” which seems to consist of the love of *foreign* soil. It is my aim to show that the prosperous discharge of the duties of honest industry, may be united with ample devotion to literary pursuits. I wish there were time to take up by the roots the wretched prejudice, which would bind down the aspiring spirit of man to the low atmosphere of his daily craft. There is for every one an appropriate sphere of action ; but no one exists for that alone, no matter how elevated it may be. Men do not live in order to be merchants, or physicians, or lawyers, but their

professions are only means by which they strive to attain some object—wealth, or fame, or both. It would be easy to refute the error, by showing that habits, not only of reading, but of authorship, and even the cultivation of the least earthy of the human powers, high imagination, may harmonise with the common drudgery of life. When our thoughts turn to the names of men illustrious in letters, we are apt to think only of so much of their occupations as has served to perpetuate their memories, and to forget that they had their every-day work, like the rest of us. We do not reflect, for instance, that Chaucer, and Spenser, and Milton, were clerks in the public service, and they were faithful to their trusts. Shakspeare was the thrifty and thriving manager of a theatre, and we may infer he was a man of business. The most imaginative and prolific author of our own day, was the patient scribe of a Scotish court of justice, and another less ambitious writer, Charles Lamb, earned his peculiar reputation during three and thirty years' service as a merchant's clerk, bound, to use his own feeling language, to "the desk's dead wood." The instance which perhaps best illustrates that extensive literary pursuits, both of study and authorship, may be blended with active philanthropy, and the complicated functions of a modern man of business, is the career of Roscoe. I can only glance at it, reminding you that his biography shows how the defects of early education may be supplied, and that important literary enterprises need cause no interference with the practice of an attorney. It has been remarked by one of his biographers, that "it was greatly to the credit of Liverpool that its merchants continued to employ and confide in a literary man of business, proving themselves superior to the vulgar prejudice, that a man of any occupation must be ruining himself and all who are concerned with him, if his mind, heart, and soul are not absorbed in the working-day means of his livelihood."* Nor was it only

* See note 1.

with the law that the literary engagements of Mr. Roscoe are found to have harmonised ; for having changed his profession for commercial life, there appeared the same beautiful concord between the occupations of the man of letters and the merchant. But I may be reminded that his commercial career was at last unfortunate, and that the example is therefore not available for the argument. Yes, pecuniary difficulties, disasters, bankruptcy, overtook him—and so they may any man who is exposed to the risks of trade. In the case of Roscoe, the earnings of his professional and commercial careers—his property of every tangible kind—his collection of works of art—his cherished library, all were surrendered to appease, not so much the demands of creditors, as the promptings of his own integrity. And how was he then left ? Was he destitute and forlorn as the restless spirit of a bankrupt broker, with no resource but to haunt the neighbourhood of the Exchange ? No—in the season of poverty, he was rich in substantial friendships, and yet more in the treasures of his mind. He was independent of the world. The love of letters gave him all that wealth could give—it gave more than wealth could give—the tranquil happiness of a studious old age.

But why need we go so far as to bring from Liverpool an instance to contradict this prejudice ? Is it rational for men living in this city of ours, to allow it to enter into their thoughts ? Let the objection come from any class of this community, and it may be disproved by some living example from the same rank. I do not wish to introduce names, but at the risk of censure from those who can impute a wrong motive, I do want an argument strong from its familiarity to bring home to every one that hears me. If the physician urge that it is inconsistent with his professional character to devote any time to literature, he may be reminded that a valuable part of the life of one of the oldest and most eminent practitioners in this city, was occupied with the

preparation of a literary work,* connected with his profession only so far as indicating that his taste for English oratory gave promise of his fame as a lecturer. If the objection come from a lawyer, I would retort upon him the habits of the most distinguished members of the bar, and of some who have risen to judicial eminence. Nay, more, is it not known, that whenever, as at present in the instance of one whose life has been peculiarly a public life,—whenever there are added the cares which rest upon a virtuous statesman, the union of public and professional labours shows that to every effort, whether in vindicating the rights of a client, or discharging the duties of a representative, there is brought the combined vigour both of letters and of law? Again, does the objection come from one engaged in any species of trade? Can the merchant harbour this thought, that literature is a useless or a dangerous companion to men whose dealings are with accounts, forgetting that the name, which more than any other on this continent is identified with the most arduous commercial duties, and the most difficult operations in banking, is the name of an accomplished scholar? And let me add, that I cannot doubt that the famed serenity of that citizen, constituting probably one of the elements of his intellectual power, is sustained by the refreshing influences of a literary habit. It is the light in which a student dwells, which is the light of “summer mornings.”

It ought not to be concealed, that the prejudice I am combating has too often received countenance from literary men themselves. Their pursuits are sometimes allowed to encroach on more imperative duties, and are pleaded in excuse for neglect of some of the general obligations of mankind. The plea is not more injurious than it is groundless; like the spurious claim of false genius, arrogating privilege for what are gently styled the eccentricities of genius. It is a mystery too deep for my fathoming, how the possession of superior mental

* Chapman's “Select Speeches.”

endowments can confer exemption from the ordinary restraints of humanity ; how it justifies a man in becoming either immoral or offensive. On an occasion suitable as to time, it would be delightful to show, that on the contrary, the highest order of intellect is associated with gentleness of spirit, and with that habit of thought which constitutes real common sense. It could be shown that the minds which have aspired highest, have also assumed the lowly duties of our race, and walked meekly "on life's common way."* The poet Cowper, in one of his inimitable letters, casts his gentle irony on the license which men claim on the score of supposed genius : "I never knew," he writes, "a poet except myself, who was punctual in any thing, or to be depended on for the due discharge of any duty, except what he thought he owed to the muses. The moment a man takes it into his foolish head that he has what the world calls genius, he gives himself a discharge from the servile drudgery of all friendly offices, and becomes good for nothing, except in the pursuit of his favourite employment."†

It may possibly be apprehended that literature may, in some instances, seduce men of business from their appropriate functions, to venture on the chances of authorship. The opportunities, which have been dwelt on, refer to the use rather than the production of books.

* This characteristic of genius closes the sublime sonnet in which Wordsworth apostrophises Milton—

"Thy soul was like a star, and dwelt apart :
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea ;
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness ; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay."

Wordsworth's Poetical Works, p. 213—"Sonnets dedicated to Liberty :" a series of the noblest effusions of a pure and philosophical patriotism in the language.

† *Southey's Works of Cowper*, vol. xv. p. 96.

While every effort should be made to persuade the man of business to the cultivation of literary tastes, he should with equal zeal be warned against indulging, for one instant, the dream of professional authorship. I protest, too, against the supposition that I am encouraging in any a propensity to the mischievous and troublesome habit of scribbling. If the fancy of any one be pleased with the vision of authorship, let him dispel it by the perusal of one of the saddest books in the language—the record of “The Calamities of Authors.” Let him read the earnest remonstrances of Coleridge, Sir Walter Scott, Charles Lamb, and even of Lord Byron. But the opinion which has still more authority, as coming from one who, placing his whole reliance on authorship, has found it the source not less of pecuniary independence than of literary fame, is that of Southey. Let me quote his language, for it tells that the most toilsome vocation is light in contrast with the pains of professional authorship:—“It was a lamentable change when literary composition, and that exercise of reason which should be, as till then it had been, the noblest of human occupations and the highest of human enjoyments, became a trade,—a mere trade, to be pursued, not from aptitude or choice, but from necessity, and for daily bread. It is a difficult as well as a delicate task, to advise a youth of ardent mind and aspiring thoughts, in the choice of a profession; but a wise man will have no hesitation in exhorting him to choose any thing rather than literature. Better that he should seek his fortune before the mast, or with a musket on his shoulder, and a knapsack at his back—better that he should follow the plough, or work at the loom or the lathe, or sweat over the anvil, than trust to literature as the only means of his support. Let the body provide for the body; the intellectual part was given us for other purposes. A single hour of composition, won from the business of the day, is worth more than the whole day’s toil of him who works at the trade of literature: in the one case, the spirit comes joyfully to refresh itself, like a hart to

the water-brooks ; in the other, it pursues its miserable way panting and jaded, with the dogs of hunger and necessity behind. Nor are respectability, worldly welfare, happiness, health, and even existence, all that are endangered by this course of life ; there are worse evils than neglect, poverty, imprisonment, and death. It is not of his earthly fortunes alone that a man may make shipwreck upon this perilous course ; his moral nature may be sacrificed, and his eternal hopes desperately hazarded. Boyse in his blanket, Savage in a prison, and Smart scrawling his most impassioned verses with charcoal upon the walls of a madhouse, are not the most mournful examples which might be held up to kindred spirits. There are even more pitiable objects than Chatterton himself with the poison at his lips. His mighty mind brought with it into the world a taint of hereditary insanity, which explains the act of suicide, and divests it of its fearful guilt. But it is when literary adventurers commit the act of moral suicide, that they render themselves objects of as much compassion as is compatible with abhorrence—when they become base in the basest way, and acting as panders to the lowest vices, or the worst passions of man's corrupted nature, deal in scandal, sedition, obscenity, or blasphemy, whichever article may be most in demand, according to the disease of the age.”*

The cultivation of literary habits has not been presented in the light of duty ; but there is one view especially applicable to commercial men, which ought not to be omitted. I hazard little in saying, that no human agency has wrought greater change in the world than the spirit of trade. The missionary may be abroad—the schoolmaster may be abroad, but the merchant has penetrated into every avenue of society, and is exerting an influence on the moral as well as physical condition of mankind. He ministers to the wants of the humblest as well as of the highest. He sends out the hardy mariner on a distant and dangerous voyage, and by that en-

* *Southey's Essays*, vol. ii. p. 83.—See note 2.

terprise the light of the student's lamp need never fail. He tells the student of the precious old books on the bookstalls perhaps of London, and then, as one* of those old writers quaintly remarks, "Merchants have long arms, and by their bills of exchange reach all the world over;" he stretches forth his arm, and soon places a volume on the student's table. His influence is felt, too, on a larger scale: one region of the globe is visited, for instance, with a blighted crop—the merchant forewarns his correspondents, and literally as swift as the wind the ocean is white with the canvass of ships, freighted, to equalise the bounties of Heaven, and thus famines, with pestilence in their train, are calamities that are only read of. Again, the merchant has quenched the fiercest passion that burns in the human heart—the lust of war. What was it that at last broke the power of Napoleon, but the strength of commercial spirit? and it was a poor retort for the baffled warrior to taunt the conqueror as "a nation of shopkeepers." On a late occasion of difficulties between our own country and a European power, what was it that mediated to restore the ancient amity, but the commercial spirit of Britain? And what more than the spirit of commerce has fostered the natural harmony between nations speaking the same noble language? With regard to the relation between the United States and England, it is perhaps vain to expect that the traces of a violent separation should be wholly effaced. Coleridge's sublime image of a broken friendship, may aptly emblem the moral attitude of the two countries—

"They stand aloof, the scars remaining,
Like cliffs which had been rent asunder,
A dreary sea hath flowed between,
And neither heat, nor frost, nor thunder,
Shall wholly do away, I ween,
The marks of that which once hath been."†

* Fuller's Church History of Britain, book viii. sect. 3.

† Coleridge's "Christabel."

The animosities of a revolution, rekindled by a second war, do not subside at once. But whatever prejudices may float on the surface, there must flow an under current of friendly feeling, springing from a community of interests and of letters. Apart from the sympathies of the thoughtful and studious of the two nations, what has contributed more to that friendly feeling, more to abate ancient resentments, than the spirit of commerce? The merchant has reason to be proud, looking to the vast or the minute influences of trade, who is better entitled to the honourable exultation, that his industry is identified with the happiness of mankind? But, then let him reflect that every state of society brings with it its peculiar perils—and, while he boasts of having banished war from the world, let him remember, that at the same time there have been banished the ennobling thoughts which owe their birth to the dangers of war. It must not be forgotten, that there may be the lethargy of peace as well as its repose. The hardy virtues, rudely rocked by the hand of war, are often nursed too daintily in the lap of peace. The manly discipline of danger may be relaxed, and we may grow faint-hearted with the blandishments of security. The influence of commerce on modern society has been adverted to, for the single purpose of suggesting whether there are not peculiar duties resting upon those whose lives have fallen on a peaceful age, and whether it is not one of those duties to cultivate the purifying and elevating influences of letters. It is the profound thought of a great living poet, that the literature of the English language is conservative of the freedom of those who speak it, and the proud enthusiasm of Wordsworth may be echoed by us—

“ We must be free or die, who speak the tongue
 That Shakspeare spake ; the faith and morals hold
 Which Milton held.”

In proceeding to point out some of the inducements to cultivate those opportunities, the existence of which I

have endeavoured to establish, those only will be noticed which are connected with active life.

It is a familiar truth, that the happiness of life is made up of its little unremembered incidents, rather than of its more conspicuous events. Now, there is nothing more fatal to happiness, than an incapacity to provide for unoccupied time. Beside the ordinary intermissions [of daily labour, there are intervals of occasional leisure, incident to every occupation. Even the common casualties in traveling, whether for business or pleasure, will often throw you on your own resources—for instance, the weary confinement in a steamboat is to be whiled away—you may be embargoed in a forlorn country tavern—you may fail in the desperate devices of amusement at a dull watering-place, where every meal becomes an epoch to break the monotony of the day. Again, accident may interfere with most recreations; a plan of pleasure may be quenched by a shower of rain; an easterly storm may prevent the giving or receiving a visit. A hundred mishaps may break the frail tenure of your amusements; a suit of mourning and a sense of propriety, may withdraw you for a season from many of them. Your common pleasures may be cut off by a tedious indisposition; you may be on the neutral ground of convalescence—too weak to go out, and yet well enough to be left alone. Solitude may in various forms be forced upon you, and miserable is the state of that person whose habit is to depend entirely on external support.* On the other hand, exactly in proportion as habits of reading are cultivated, will the dangers of idleness and the pains of listlessness be diminished. Every day,—the rainy as well as the bright ones,—will show how strong, how independent, and how happy we may be in the companionship of books.

The cultivation of a taste for literature, open as it is to all, may exert an influence on society as it is constituted in large cities, where there is a tendency to sepa-

* See note 3.

rate into clans. Whatever can infuse into these various divisions a community of virtuous feeling, will contribute to their mutual improvement. We might, in this respect, take lesson from the opposite results of the sympathies of the worthless. What is it that makes up the power of a lawless mob? Hundreds of the most degraded are suddenly congregated near one spot—ruffians who have never met, and may never meet again—their faces hid by night from each other's sight—and yet when the contagion of some wicked sympathy has seized them, they can strike terror into the heart of a trembling city. Now, the sympathies of the good and the intelligent are not less strong, because they wear a gentler form, and speak in tones milder than the voice of tumult. We live too much in ignorance of the hidden feelings which connect us together. Whatever awakens the common principles of human nature, or creates a fellowship among men, adds to the stock of moral power. It is vain to force discordant alliances; but the more you can by natural sympathies unite the departments of society, the more you add to its virtue. A deep influence of this kind may be traced in the harmonising effects of literary tastes. If two persons but read the same book, there is a concord in the heart of one which may be answered from the heart of the other. Strangers, with the ocean between, discover in some sympathy of literature the elements of friendship, and may not those who dwell in the houses of the same city be bound still more closely together by the same principle? Each disinterested fellow-feeling gives vigour to our local attachments—those emotions kindred to the family of virtues. “Show me,” says the wise author of a very pleasant book, “a man who cares no more for one place than another, and I will show you in that same person one who loves nothing but himself.”†

Another salutary influence of literature is in the correction of some of the incidental effects of the ordinary

* “The Doctor,” vol. ii. p. 15.

intercourse between man and man. The turmoil of the world demands the ruder energies of our nature—dexterity in making bargains; caution in guarding our interests; sternness in vindicating our rights; reserve to check impertinence and intrusion; and the less amiable elements of our being are wanted to encounter the harsh contact to which we are exposed. With these so often in view, we are apt to forget the purer and holier affections, that are deep buried in the heart. Not reflecting that, unlike the other principles, they are from their very nature susceptible of only occasional development, we are in danger of doubting their very existence. It was a beautiful reflection of that merchant's clerk to whom I have already alluded, that "there is a monotony in the affections, which people living together, or very frequently seeing each other, are apt to give into; a sort of indifference in the expression of kindness for each other, which demands that we should sometimes call to our aid the trickery of surprise."* In the same way, meeting in our daily walks, passing by those whose faces have become familiar by frequent encounter, we do not realise the untold attachment which exists among us, needing only some chance to call it forth—mutual affection springing from the fact of the scene of our lives being the same, and confirmed by that pride which did not soil the tongue of an inspired apostle, that we are "citizens of no mean city."

The tendency of active life is not only often to conceal some of the purest elements of human nature, but to bring into undue prominence many of the worst. The angry passions are seen in ceaseless conflict—the lust of power; corrupt and malignant party spirit; the insatiable thirst for money; the fierce contests of vulgar minded men; blasphemy; the recklessness of the profligate, are spectacles that the sun shines on daily. And what weighs down the heart yet more, is the contempla-

* Charles Lamb's letter respecting the dedication with which he proposed to surprise his sister.

tion forced on every one, of the little passions, miserable jealousies and suspicions, intrigues and artifices, the tricks of self-advancement, envy of another man's good name, the small devices to get a small reputation, the diminutive malice of an unforgiving temper, and all the meannesses of mankind, which, more than open malignity, engender disgust with human nature. There is nothing easier than to become a misanthrope. Looking at the picture of life on the dark side, men become cynical ; the scurf of infidelity grows over their hearts ; they seat themselves in "the seat of the scornful," and the very lineaments of the face settle into the malignant sneer which is so painfully stamped on the portrait of a Voltaire. The hopefulness of even the pure in spirit sickens, for they behold the generous and confiding betrayed, the open-hearted victims to their own frankness ; kindness returned with ingratitude ; modest worth patient under the usurpations of falsehood and of impudence, and thus virtue is thrown back upon itself. These are perils of human life, and oh ! how is the heart to be sustained when it looks forth on such sights as these ? There is, indeed, a higher agency than literature, yet it may help to save from despairing of human nature. It tells that, in spite of disappointments, there is room for virtuous hope. While the feelings of the man of the world are embittered by the strife of the angry and little passions, the student can refresh his spirit by contemplating the purer passions that move in a loftier sphere. The worst passions lie on the surface—seldom slumbering, and always ready to start into action ; the truth of their existence is the sad lesson we are taught by the world ; the equal truth of the existence of our nobler emotions we may learn from communion with the wise and good, on the pages of books.

The easy access to books at the present day, is too familiar for comment. Embarrassment of an opposite kind arises from the inordinate increase of publications. At a period when there are hundreds of authors, and thousands of critics, there is danger of being bewildered

in the crowd. The mind is oppressed with the conception of the number of books, and still more alarmed at the prospect of the rising flood. It was no doubt a merciful providence, that the art of printing was not brought earlier into action.* It is erroneous to suppose, that for ordinary purposes a great number or variety of books is needed. A collection of twenty, or even fewer volumes, might be named, which would serve as fast and never-failing friends. Let no one accustom himself to depend entirely on cotemporary publications—a wretched way of living as it were from hand to mouth. It was a ridiculous piece of barbarian aristocracy, which caused the Otaheitan chieftains, as described by an early navigator, to deem it beneath their dignity to feed themselves rather than to open their mouths to their attendants. The minds of those who rely on the chance issues of the press, are in the same childish state. But the choice of books, and habits of reading, are subjects too extensive to be treated even incidentally. I desire only to present a warning which may be useful not only to those of partially formed tastes, but to habitual readers. It occurs in the anonymous work entitled "The Doctor," a production not less rich in wisdom than in learning and wit: "Readers, you whose hearts are open, whose understandings are not yet hardened, and whose feelings are neither exhausted nor incrusted by the world, take from me a better rule than any professors of criticism will teach you !

"Would you know whether the tendency of a book is good or evil, examine in what state of mind you lay it down. Has it induced you to suspect that what you have been accustomed to think unlawful, may after all be innocent; and that that may be harmless which you have hitherto been taught to think dangerous? Has it tended to make you dissatisfied and impatient, under the control of others; and disposed you to relax in that self-government, without which both the laws of God

* See note 4.

and man tell us there can be no virtue, and consequently no happiness ? Has it attempted to abate your admiration and reverence for what is great and good, and to diminish in you the love of your country and your fellow-creatures ? Has it addressed itself to your pride, your vanity, your selfishness, or any other of your evil propensities ? Has it defiled the imagination with what is loathsome, and shocked the heart with what is monstrous ? Has it disturbed the sense of right and wrong, which the Creator has implanted in the human soul ? If so—if you are conscious of all or any of these effects—or, if having escaped from all, you have felt that such were the effects it was intended to produce, throw the book in the fire, whatever name it may bear in the title page ! Throw it in the fire, young man, though it should have been the gift of a friend ! Young lady, away with the whole set, though it should be the prominent furniture of a rose-wood book case !”*

There is one department of letters on which I desire to say a few words, because it is peculiarly exposed to the injury of being too often taken at second hand—the literature of the drama. It is far from my intention to touch the general topic of theatrical exhibitions, but I do stand here to maintain the value of private study. The stage may be a fit mirror for the works of most dramatists, but if any person relies upon it as a faithful interpreter of the gentle spirit and the “myriad mind” of Shakespeare, let me warn him that he is wofully deceived. That region is too lofty and too pure for scenic art to reach. The genius of Garrick sank beneath the effort. The deep philosophy and the delicate painting are to be appreciated with the book in hand, and if any one has put his intellect in pledge to receive his idea of Shakespeare from the actors, let me remind him that at least four of his chief dramas have been wretchedly mutilated for the very purpose of adapting them to the stage. In Richard, passages have been interpolated which the heart

* “The Doctor,” vol. ii. p. 87.

of the poet would have repudiated with disgust. In the *Tempest* there was not love enough, and actually a second pair of lovers is thrust in. *Romeo and Juliet* was not tragic enough, and a deeper shade is added to the catastrophe. *King Lear* was too tragic, and the catastrophe must be abated. Whatever may have been done of late years to restore that overpowering drama nearer to its truth, it is still far from being the same drama we find in the book. Allow me to sustain these opinions by the authority of one who, having witnessed the best theatric talent of his times, retired to his own secluded study as the only theatre in which he could behold the genius of Shakspeare. Charles Lamb, with all his partialities for the stage, has recorded this deliberate judgment : “ The Lear of Shakspeare cannot be acted—it is essentially impossible to be represented on a stage. The contemptible machinery by which they mimic the storm he goes out in, is not more inadequate to represent the horrors of the real elements, than any actor can be to represent Lear : they might more easily propose to personate the Satan of Milton upon a stage, or one of Michael Angelo’s terrible figures. The greatness of Lear is not in corporal dimension, but in intellectual ; the explosions of his passions are terrible as a volcano ; they are storms turning up and disclosing to the bottom that sea, his mind, with all its vast riches. It is his mind which is laid bare. This case of flesh and blood seems too insignificant to be thought on ; even as he himself neglects it. On the stage we see nothing but corporal infirmities and weakness, the impotence of rage : while we read it, we see not Lear, but we are Lear, we are in his mind, we are sustained by a grandeur which baffles the malice of daughters and storms. What have looks or tones to do with that sublime identification of his age, with that of the *heavens themselves*, when in his reproaches to them for conniving at the injustice of his children, he reminds them that “ they themselves are old ? ” What gesture shall we appropriate to this ? What has the voice or the eye to do with such

things ? But the play is beyond all art, as the tamperings with it show : it is too hard and stony ; it must have love scenes and a happy ending. It is not enough that Cordelia is a daughter, she must shine as a lover too. . . . A happy ending !—as if the living martyrdom that Lear had gone through,—the flaying of his feelings alive, did not make a fair dismissal from the stage of life, the only decorous thing for him. If he is to live and be happy after ; if he could sustain this world's burden after, why all this pudder and preparation—why torment us with all this unnecessary sympathy ? As if the childish pleasure of getting his gilt robes and sceptre again could tempt him to act over again his misused station,—as if at his years, and with his experience, any thing was left but to die.”*

There is one vitiated literary habit which demands a word of condemnation. The value of literature in the eyes of some seems to be, that it ministers to vanity and self-display. The printed page is made the pattern of conversation, and it is deemed wise to “ talk like a book.” Too impatient for the developments of nature, like children gardening, they dig up the seed which they have planted, to see and to show how much it may have grown. By such childishness a reproach is brought upon literature, and some who thus falsely cultivate it, become nuisances in society. The well-informed are often, under the apprehension of imputed ostentation, found retiring into the harmlessness of silence, when the foremost rank is filled with the more presumptuous and less worthy—the pedants of both sexes.

True literature, applied to its true purposes, will leave no hour weary—it tranquillises the cares and the asperities of business—it fosters the sympathies of society, and more than all, it crowns the love of home. Relying on a habit of reading, rather than on common amusements, you find the heart more equally sustained—a permanency impressed upon the feelings—the freshness of

* *Essay on the Tragedies of Shakspeare.*

youth carried forward into the maturity of manhood—a harmony given to your life—

“Thy thoughts and feelings shall not die,
Nor leave thee, when gray hairs are nigh,
A melancholy slave;
But an old age serene and bright,
And lovely as a Lapland night,
Shall lead thee to thy grave.”*

* Wordsworth’s Poetical Works, p. 341.

N O T E S .

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NOTE 1.

The quotation is from the Life of Roscoe, by Hartley Coleridge, contained in his "*Biographia Borealis, or Lives of Distinguished Northerns*," a volume of uncommon worth and attractiveness, not only for biographical information, but for the truth of the feeling and philosophy interwoven with it. The biography contains the following passages, which are also pertinent to the present occasion ; referring to some poetical pieces of Lorenzo de Medici, collected and published by Mr. Roscoe, the biographer adds—

" He conferred a benefit on all merchants, all politicians, and all poets, by so doing. For they prove that neither commerce nor politics destroy the vigour of imagination, or make callous the poetic sensibilities ; and prove, too, that the imagination may be exercised and beautified, the finest susceptibilities may be kept alive, without impairing the practical judgment and executive powers,—without unfitting a man for the world. In the faculties which the great Creator has bestowed upon his creatures, there is no envy, no grudging, no monopoly ; one pines not because another flourishes ; if any be emaciated, it is not because another is fed, but because itself is starved. Shakspeare himself displayed the abilities of a ruler. Was he not a manager ? and in that capacity had he not jarring interests to reconcile, factions to pacify or subdue, finances to arrange, and a capricious public to satisfy ? His worldly avocations were as little poetical as those of any man on 'change.'"

Of Mr. Roscoe's pecuniary difficulties he says—

“ During this four years' struggle, he alienated those treasures of art and learning which it had been the pride and pleasure of his life to gather together. Books, prints, drawings, pictures, all went rather to testify his honour than to satisfy his creditors. Yet his feelings were not aggravated either by the world's reproach or his own. Those who lost by his losses, never questioned his integrity ; and he never complained, or had cause to complain, of any superfluous rigour from the persons to whom he was indebted. It was a common misfortune, which was to be divided as equally as possible.”

“ Nothing can better display the composure or the vigour of his mind, under these trials, than the beautiful sonnet with which he took leave of his library :

As one who, destined from his friends to part,
Regrets their loss, yet hopes again erewhile
To share their converse and enjoy their smile,
And tempers, as he may, affliction's dart—
Thus, lov'd associates ! chiefs of elder art !
Teachers of wisdom, who could once beguile
My tedious hours, and brighten every toil,
I now resign you, nor with fainting heart :
For, pass a few short years, or days, or hours,
And happier seasons may their dawn unfold,
And all your sacred fellowships restore ;
When, freed from earth, unlimited its powers,
Mind shall with mind direct communion hold,
And kindred spirits meet, to part no more.”

The reader of the Sketch Book will remember Washington Irving's fine tribute to the character of Roscoe.

NOTE. 2.

Having quoted this strong remonstrance of Southey's against professional authorship, I am desirous of connecting with it here, his equally feeling expression of literary

happiness. For the earnest admonition in the former, the fashion of prose was appropriate ; but the deep emotion of the latter demanded the more impassioned form of verse. It occurs in a letter to Sir Egerton Brydges :

“ Having no library within reach, I live upon my own stores—which are, however, more ample perhaps than were ever before possessed by one whose whole estate was in his inkstand.

“ My days among the dead are past ;
 Around me I behold,
 Where'er these casual eyes are cast,
 The mighty minds of old :
 My never failing friends are they
 With whom I converse day by day.

“ With them I take delight in weal,
 And seek relief in wo
 And while I understand and feel
 How much to them I owe,
 My cheeks have often been bedewed
 With tears of thoughtful gratitude.

“ My thoughts are with the dead : with them
 I live in long past years—
 Their virtues love, their faults condemn—
 Partake their hopes and fears ;
 And from their lessons seek and find
 Instruction with a humble mind.

“ My hopes are with the dead : anon
 My place with them will be—
 And I with them shall travel on
 Through all futurity ;
 Yet leaving here a name, I trust,
 That will not perish in the dust.”

Autobiography of Sir E. Brydges, Vol. II., p. 272.

NOTE 3.

The dangers and difficulties of solitude are the theme of one of Cowley's prose essays, from which the following passage is quoted :

“ Our dear self is so wearisome to us, that we can scarcely support its conversation for an hour together. . . . It is a deplorable condition, this, and drives a man sometimes to pitiful shifts, in seeking how to avoid himself. The truth of the matter is, that neither he who is a fop in the world is a fit man to be alone, nor he who has set his heart much upon the world, though he have never so much understanding ; so that solitude can be well fitted and sit right, but upon a very few persons. They must have enough knowledge of the world to see the vanity of it, and enough virtue to despise all vanity : if the mind be possessed with any lust or passions, a man had better be in a fair than in a wood alone. They may, like petty thieves, cheat us perhaps, and pick our pockets, in the midst of company ; but, like robbers, they use to strip and bind, or murder us, when they catch us alone. This is but to retreat from men, and to fall into the hands of devils. It is like the punishment of parricides among the Romans—to be sewed into a bag with an ape, a dog, and a serpent.

“ The first work, therefore, that a man must do, to make himself capable of the good of solitude, is the very eradication of all his lusts ; for how is it possible for a man to enjoy himself, while his affections are tied to things without himself ? In the second place, he must learn the art, and get the habit of thinking : for this, too, no less than well speaking, depends upon much practice ; and cogitation is the thing which distinguishes the solitude of a God from a wild beast. Now, because the soul of man is not, by its own nature or observation, furnished with sufficient materials to work upon, it is necessary for it to have continual recourse to learning and books

for fresh supplies—so that the solitary life will grow indigent and be ready to starve without them ; but if once we be thoroughly engaged in the love of letters, instead of being wearied with the length of any day, we shall only complain of the shortness of our whole life.

“ O vita, stulto longior, sapient frevio !
O life, long to the fool, short to the wise.

“ The first minister of state has not so much business in public, as a wise man has in private : if the one have little leisure to be alone, the other has less to be in company ; the one has but part of the affairs of one nation, the other all the works of God and nature under his consideration. There is no saying shocks me so much as that which I hear often—‘ That a man does not know how to pass his time.’ It would have been but ill spoken by Methusalem in the nine hundred sixty-ninth year of his life ; so far it is from us, who have not time enough to attain to the utmost perfection of any part of any science, to have cause to complain that we are forced to be idle for want of work. But this, you will say, is work only for the learned—others are not capable either of the employments or diversions that arrives from letters. I know they are not ; and therefore cannot much recommend solitude to a man totally illiterate. But if any man be so unlearned as to want entertainment of the little intervals of accidental solitude, which frequently occur in almost all conditions, it is truly a great shame, both to his parents and to himself.”—*Cowley’s Essays*.

The perils of solitude are presented in a somewhat more startling form, by Sir Thomas Brown :

“ Lord, deliver me from myself, is a part of my litany, and the first voice of my retired imaginations. There is no man alone, because every man is a *microcosm*, and carries the whole world about him : *nunquam minus solus quam cum solus*, though it be the apophthegm of a wise man, is yet true in the mouth of a fool ; for, indeed,

though in a wilderness, a man is never alone, not only because he is with himself and his own thoughts, but because he is with the devil, who ever consorts with our solitude, and is that unruly rebel that musters up those disordered motives which accompany our sequestered imaginations."—*Religio Medici*, Part II.

NOTE 4.

To this expression of small thanksgiving, thrown out half in jest, with regard to the invention of printing, I find quite a grave counterpart, on recurring since to a volume of Sir Thomas Brown's. His meditation, even two hundred years ago, was as follows:

"I have heard some with deep sighs lament the lost lines of Cicero; others with as deep groans deplore the combustion of the library of Alexandria: for my own part, I think there be too many in the world, and could with patience behold the urn and ashes of the Vatican, could I with a few others, recover the perished leaves of of Solomon. I would not omit a copy of Enoch's Pillars, had they many nearer authors than Josephus, or did not relish somewhat of the fable. Some men have written more than others have spoken: Pineda* quotes more authors in one work than are necessary in a whole world. Of those three great inventions† in Germany, there are two which are not without their incommodities. It is not a melancholy *utinam* of my own, but the desires of better heads, that there were a general synod, not to unite the incompatible difference of religion, but for the benefit of learning, to reduce it as it lay at first, in a few and solid authors, and to condemn to the fire those swarms and millions of *rhapsodies* begotten only to distract and abuse the weaker judgments of scholars, and to maintain the trade and mystery of typographers."

Religio Medici, Part I.

Sir Egerton Brydges quotes an extract from Cobbett's Register, which contains an alarming evidence of the increase of literary supply :

“ It is a curious fact, that, within these four or five years, no less than four corn-mills, in the neighbourhood of Uxbridge, and several in the neighbourhood of Maidstone, have been turned into paper-mills ! One would think that the poor souls had actually taken to eating the books.”

Autobiography of Sir E. Brydges, Vol. I., p. 352.

THE END.



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